

A Brief History of Popular Assemblies and Worker Councils

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The phenomenon of popular assemblies and workers' councils has appeared many times throughout history. These organs of self-management usually spring up spontaneously during a crisis or revolution when ordinary people begin to organize their own lives. Popular assemblies are meetings of ordinary people which organize against the dominant hierarchical institutions (states, corporations, etc). Assemblies are non-hierarchical, with everyone having an equal power instead of dividing the group into order takers and order givers. Direct democracy is usually used to make decisions in the assemblies. These assemblies can be formed in the neighborhoods, factories, schools, villages and elsewhere. They typically use mandated & recallable delegates to coordinate their activities. Mandated delegates simply implement the decisions of their assemblies, where decision making power stays, unlike representatives who can implement any decision they want. The most famous systems of mandated & recallable delegates are the workers councils, which are confederations of worker assemblies. This system of decentralized direct democracy is the embryo of an anarchist society. An anarchist society would be organized by voluntary non-hierarchical associations, such as these assemblies & councils, rather than through authoritarian institutions like corporations and the state. Most of the time these organizations have appeared the majority of participants were not anarchists and did not see these organizations as the embryo of the future society. As a result they are usually short lived and disband within a few years. However, they provide a glimpse of how a free society could organize itself and are obviously important to anyone seeking to change society in an anarchistic direction, which is why I've put together this index. This index of periods when these assemblies & councils have appeared focuses mainly on the 20th century and is most certainly not comprehensive. Only those times when these assemblies have challenged the dominant institutions have been included; these types of organizations are often present in many societies but do not challenge the status quo.

French Revolution, 1790–93

During the French Revolution poor people called sans-culottes formed neighborhood assemblies called sections. They used a system of mandated and recallable delegates to coordinate their activities and were partly responsible for overthrowing the King. The Jacobins, advocates of representative government, shut down the sections and launched a reign of terror to eliminate their enemies.

Russia, 1905

At the end of the Russo-Japanese war Russian workers, peasants and capitalists rebelled against the Tsar. Peasants took over land from the landlords; village assemblies started to run the villages. Workers went on strike and began taking over the factories, where they formed worker assemblies. They used mandated and recallable delegates, who met in meetings called Soviets, to coordinate their actions. The Tsar granted concessions, including the creation of an elected parliament, the Duma, and repressed those who continued to rebel.

Mexican Revolution, 1910–19

During the Mexican Revolution there were numerous peasant rebellions in favor of land redistribution. Peasant-based armies and partisans were formed to fight in the civil war, such as the army lead by Emiliano Zapata. In many villages where government forces had been driven out land was expropriated from the landlords and decentralized direct democracy practiced. Village assemblies and councils were formed to run the villages. In the process of the revolution and civil war Mexican nationalists came to power. They successfully played the workers and the peasants against each other, eventually defeating the peasant armies and shutting down the popular assemblies.

Russian Revolution, 1917–21

In February 1917 a spontaneous rebellion overthrew the Tsar and created a Republican government. Afterwards, worker assemblies and the Soviets reappeared. Peasant assemblies began taking over the land and workers the factories. In October 1917 the Bolshevik party led an insurrection which overthrew the government and established a one party dictatorship. By mid-1918 the Soviets had gone from being directly democratic forms of coordination to representative institutions to finally simply rubber-stamping the decisions of the Bolshevik party with no real power at all. The Bolsheviks attempted to forcibly dispersed the popular assemblies and were eventually successful. There were numerous rebellions against their rule through 1921 which sought to reestablish the popular assemblies and directly democratic soviets. The Russian Revolution was the start of a wave of unrest that would spread across the globe over the next several years.

Ukrainian Revolution, 1918–21

In the Spring of 1918 the new Bolshevik government made peace with Germany and agreed to allow them to take over Ukraine and other areas formerly part of the Russian Empire. The people in the Ukraine had no say in this and revolted against the Germans. After the February revolution in Russia peasant village assemblies had begun taking over the land. They formed Free Soviets which, unlike the Russian versions subordinated to the Bolsheviks, were free of political parties and were controlled by the peasants & workers. In some places resources were pooled and communes formed. They formed decentralized democratic militias that fought against reactionaries and foreign invaders. Anarchists played an important role in organizing all of this, especially the Anarcho-Communist Nestor Makhno. These partisan groups were able to defeat the Germans, Austrians, Ukrainian Nationalists and two white armies (the whites were Russian reactionaries). In 1921 the Bolsheviks invaded Ukraine and used their superior resources to conquer it, violently suppressing the communes, free Soviets and popular assemblies.

German Revolution, 1918–23

In the later part of 1918 mass mutinies and strikes overthrew the German Monarchy, forced the government to end it's participation in the first world war and eventually lead to the creation

of the Weimar Republic. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) came to power as workers began forming workers' councils. In the following years Germany underwent a series of revolutions and counter-revolutions as far left parties attempted to imitate the Russian Revolution. Most of the workers continued to have faith in the SPD and other political parties, which made it easy for them to take charge of revolt and then disarm it. By 1923 the SPD had managed to defeat the far left parties and destroy the workers' councils.

Hungary, 1918–19

In the later part of 1918 a popular revolution overthrew the Hungarian government and brought to power a Republic. As in the German, Russian and Ukrainian revolution workers' councils, soviets, were created. In 1919 the Hungarian republic was overthrown and a Soviet Republic, led by the Hungarian Communist party, was declared. Like the "Soviet" Republic in Russia this "dictatorship of the proletariat" quickly developed into a new bureaucratic ruling class that oppressed and exploited the workers & peasants, complete with its own red terror. This new ruling class did not have as much time to develop as the one in Russia, however. Romania, Czechoslovakia and Serbia, supported by the United States and Western Europe, invaded and deposed the "Soviet" government. The new government was a right-wing oligarchy which launched its own white terror that destroyed what was left of the revolution and workers' councils that had not already been destroyed by the red terror.

Italy, 1920

In 1920 workers in Italy began taking over their factories on a mass scale. Peasants also began taking over the land. The leaders of the Italian Socialist Party, who wanted to gain power for themselves by working within the system, effectively sabotaged the movement. They negotiated with the capitalists & state to gain a few reforms and then helped get the workers to give up control of the factories and go back to obeying the bosses. Because the Socialist Party commanded the loyalty of many workers they were effective at ending the occupations. Once the Socialist Party helped the capitalists end the occupation, the capitalists decided to put Mussolini in power and implement Fascism in order to maintain their rule.

Shinmin Autonomous Province, 1929–31

In the later 20s and early 30s anarchists and other groups waged guerilla war against the Japanese empire in Manchuria. During this parts of Manchuria, including Shinmin province, were liberated from Japanese rule and semi-anarchic systems based on village councils & assemblies set up. The anarchists also had to deal with the attempts of Marxists (who were also fighting a guerilla war against Japanese rule) to assassinate rival activists and destroy the assemblies & councils. The Japanese eventually defeated all of the various guerilla groups.

Spanish Revolution, 1936–37

On July 19th, 1936 Fascists launched a coup against the Spanish Republic. In response the National Confederation of Labor (CNT), an anarcho-syndicalist union, and the General Union of Workers, a union affiliated with the Spanish Socialist Party, called a general strike. The Republic refused to release arms to the workers so they broke into the barracks and distributed arms to the people. After this happened the Republic decided to distribute arms to the workers. The workers fought and defeated the Fascist coup in two-thirds of Spain, in the process launching an anarcho-syndicalist revolution. As a result the state was effectively destroyed; the military was in rebellion and the police forces had dissolved during the fighting. The workers and peasants took over the land and factories, forming collectives throughout anti-fascist Spain. In some villages money was abolished and anarcho-communism implemented. Worker & village assemblies, and federations of assemblies, took over the running of the economy. Democratic militias were formed to fight against the Fascists. The anarcho-syndicalists, however, chose not to complete the revolution by forming neighborhood assemblies and completely abolishing money. Instead they chose to allow the state to be restored in order to form an alliance with other anti-fascist groups, including the Republicans and Marxists. In September 1936 Anarchists from the CNT were made ministers in the Republic and the state began to restore its' power. This was done in order to form an alliance with other groups against the Fascists. It was also hoped that putting the revolution on hold would increase the likelihood that the western "democracies" would help the anti-fascist cause but they never did. A minority of Spanish anarchists denounced this and advocated a policy of 'revolutionary war' to both wage revolution and defeat the fascists. Over the next year the state gradually restored its' power, recreating traditional hierarchical military and police forces. In May of 1937 the anarchists were kicked out of the government and an offensive against the collectives launched; the Spanish Communist party played a major role in this. The collectives were eventually destroyed; land and industries were either nationalized or turned into private property. As a result of the destruction of the revolution by the Republic & Communist Party the population was demoralized and the Fascists won the civil war. The mistake of restoring the state destroyed the revolution.

Korea, 1945

After Japan was defeated in the second World War they withdrew their troops from Korea, which had previously been part of their empire, and allowed anarchy to engulf the peninsula. Workers took over the factories and peasants the land as they set up popular assemblies and self-managed communes. In Seoul a weak provisional government was set up, but its power was extremely limited and existed mainly in the capitol. The United States and Stalinist Russia agreed to divide Korea between each other, with the US setting up a client state in the southern half and the Russians a client state in the northern half. Both client states were extremely brutal dictatorships that violently shut down the popular assemblies.

Hungary, 1956

After World War Two Stalinist Russia took over Eastern Europe and installed a series of client states. In the 1950s rebellions erupted against these client states throughout the region. The client state in Hungary was overthrown by worker, peasant and student rebellions and the defection of many police and soldiers who were supposed to repress the rebellion. Peasant and worker councils and assemblies were set up. The Russians invaded and brutally crushed the rebellion, putting a Stalinist client state back in power.

France, 1968

In March of 1968 students began to rebel against the French state. Over the next several months they engaged in civil disobedience and eventually street fighting with the police. The police often attacked radical students without any provocation. In universities student assemblies were formed based on non-hierarchical directly democratic principles and began challenging the state and university administrations. This acted as a catalyst to cause a massive rebellion. Non-students joined the rebellion and a general strike was called against police brutality. Workers started taking over their workplaces. The leaders of the Communist party and the reformist trade unions attempted to separate the workers and the students so as to maintain their power over substantial parts of the working class. They attempted to act as mediators between the masses and the ruling class so as to gain more power for themselves and in doing so helped end the potential revolution. By June, after gaining a few reforms, they had succeeded in scuttling the revolution and returning France to 'normalcy.'

Portuguese Revolution, 1974–75

On April 25th, 1974 a rebellion by the military overthrew the Fascist dictatorship which had ruled Portugal for several decades and a multi-party republic was created. In the period following this class struggle in Portugal intensified. Worker assemblies & committees were formed to fight for improved conditions for workers and in some cases took over workplaces. They also struggled against corrupt trade unions. Neighborhood assemblies & committees were also formed to fight for better housing. In some cases they took over unused buildings; bringing homes to the homeless and improving the position of slum dwellers. At one point there were 380 self-managed factories and 500 co-ops. Most of the participants in this retained a reformist perspective; they weren't out to overthrow the system but wanted to improve their lot within it. This helped assist the decline of the revolution, since all the ruling class had to do was grant a few concessions and they were assured of staying in power. The decline was also due to the actions of the "revolutionary" authoritarian leftist parties (mostly Leninist groups) who wanted to seize power for themselves. They attempted to take over the assemblies & committees in order to catapult themselves to power and were sometimes successful. In addition to disrupting the ability of the assemblies to operate, when they succeeded in taking them over attendance would usually plummet since most people did not want to be tools of the party.

Iranian Revolution, 1978–79

In 1978 a wave of worker unrest began which would unseat the Shah, a US puppet-Monarchy installed by a CIA coup in 1953, in early 1979. Workers councils, called Shoras, were set up and many factories, offices, hospitals and universities taken over. In February 1979 fundamentalist Muslim clerics took advantage of the fall of the Shah to seize power. Under the Shah they were repressed less than other opposition factions and so were in a stronger position to take advantage of the revolution. They established a theocratic republic and suppressed all other factions as well as the Shoras.

Iraq, 1991

Shortly after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 an Iraqi anti-war movement began organizing which would eventually become very powerful. After the war with the US-led coalition began Iraqi troops mutinied and rebellions erupted throughout Iraq. In the north workers councils, called Shoras, were formed. US forces massacred retreating troops that had mutinied and suspended hostilities with the Iraqi state so that Saddam Hussein could crush the workers' rebellion. Saddam then crushed the rebellion, although it may have been able to defeat him had US forces not massacred rebellious troops. Kurdish nationalists, who opposed the Shoras, also played a role in defeating the rebellion.

Chiapas, 1994-present

On January 1, 1994 the Zapatista National Liberation Army launched an offense against the Mexican government in the state of Chiapas. Unlike many previous armed revolutionary groups the Zapatistas chose not to seize state power but instead allowed the people in the areas they liberated to organize themselves. Village assemblies have been formed and in many cases land expropriated and collectivized. These assemblies still exist today. At present neither the Zapatistas nor the Mexican army have been able to destroy the other.

Bolivia, 2000

Acting on IMF orders, the Bolivian government privatized water in Bolivia, giving US-based Betchel corp. a monopoly on water in Bolivia. Betchel immediately raised water rates by 35–300% and the government made it illegal for ordinary people to collect rainwater without buying a permit. A popular rebellion developed in response; popular assemblies were formed to coordinate the movement. They succeeded in forcing Betchel to back out of the deal, after which the assemblies declined. Reformist leaders assisted the stifling of the assemblies after the end of water privatization.

Algeria, 2001-present

In April 2001, provoked by the police murder of a high-school boy, an insurrection in the Kabylia region of Algeria erupted against the military dictatorship. The movement soon organized itself

into what they called aarchs — village and neighborhood assemblies. They created a system of mandated and recallable delegates to coordinate the actions of different aarchs. The insurrection has continued through the following years. Although it remains centered in Kabylia, rebellion in other parts of Algeria has also erupted.

Argentina, 2001–03

On December 19th, 2001 President Fernando de la Rúa, in response to a collapsing economy and increasing unrest, declared a state of siege — effectively turning Argentina into a dictatorship and revoking all civil liberties. Tens of thousands of Argentines took to the streets in a mass uprising against the state of siege. De la Rúa was forced to resign and the state of siege ended. Over the next two weeks Argentina had five Presidents as insurrections rocked the country. The government was forced to default on its' debt rather than implement another round of IMF-imposed austerity programs that had impoverished most of the population. In the wake of this worker and neighborhood assemblies were formed; they used a system of mandated and recallable delegates to coordinate the activities of different assemblies. Workers started taking over their workplaces. These assemblies were more widespread and powerful than the assemblies formed in Bolivia earlier. In the first half of 2003 these assemblies declined due to the leveling off of the economic crisis (things weren't getting any worse), attempts by authoritarian leftist groups to take over the assemblies, government repression, and a Presidential election which created the illusion that the government could solve their problems.

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